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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 003270

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, AND INR/AA
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER
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SUBJECT: AS LOCAL ELECTIONS APPROACH, THREATS TO THE
OPPOSITION GROW BOLD

Classified By: Political and Economic Chief Michael Gonzales for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) (Note: Following is an initial survey of the domestic political scene in the run-up to local elections, the first major elections since the historic May 2005 national elections and the violent aftermath. We will report developments as local elections are held next year. End Note) The newly formed National Electoral Board (NEB), installed in early July, announced the postponement of local elections in Ethiopia beyond the initially planned March 2 and 9, 2008 time frame. Opposition leaders have been uniformly consistent in their vocal protest in Parliamentary debates against what they perceive as persistent harassment by local government officials and security in limiting their ability to carry out their duties as duly elected members of Parliament. For months, opposition leaders have complained that local government administrators and security officials have placed obstacles to their access to constituents, prohibited party meetings, arrested potential local candidates for elective office, intimidated landlords into terminating leases for party offices, refused to return party membership rolls and records held since 2005, and the like. The inter-party dialogue to resolve problems have not taken place pending an apology demanded by the ruling party from the opposition for walking out on a meeting in the summer.

12. (C) In recent weeks, however, senior GoE leaders have made public more provocative threats against senior opposition leaders aimed at undercutting and isolating their activities. In an October 23 response to Parliamentary questions, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi warned MPs that the GoE has "accurate information that some opposition parties are serving as a cover for the OLF. We know the names of the individuals in the opposition who are members of the OLF. Some are working as leaders and others as ordinary members. After we gather ample evidence, we would bring them to court, but until we bring them to court, some House members who have been involved in such acts are escaping being aware of what they would face." (Note: The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) fought alongside Meles' own TPLF in the struggle to topple the communist Derg regime in 1991 and was a member of the transitional Ethiopian Government until the TPLF refused to share power with them in 1992. While the OLF has tremendous support throughout much of the Oromiya region and does not target civilians, its armed struggle has

had minimal results rendering the Front more of a cause celebre for the Oromos. The OLF has declared that it will renounce violence. The GOE continues to negotiate with the OLF outside Ethiopia. End Note).

13. (C) On October 17, Ethiopian elder and head of the Ethiopian Pardon Board Pastor Daniel Gebreselassie (strictly protect) informed PolOffs that Prime Minister Meles personally told him that Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) leaders who were recently released from prison would be re-arrested upon their return in Ethiopia if they are allied with the OLF, the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), or Eritrea. On November 2, Foreign Minister Seyoum echoed this sentiment in an interview on state media in which he said that "all of (the CUD's activities are illegal...they should know that no one can hide from the...government apparatus." CUD leaders are currently in the United States and Europe meeting with supporters and fundraising after 20 months in detention. While they were in prison, CUD supporters in the diaspora formed the Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AFD) with OLF, ONLF, and other parties. Still, as some AFD sub-parties do not support armed conflict, the Alliance has set as its sole objective the convening of a national conference of all major Ethiopian stakeholders to discuss how to move Ethiopia forward. As each of these groups feels the marginalization of their supporters by the ruling party and its affiliated cadres, makes them natural allies and should not be viewed as the CUD leaders' support for extra-constitutional measures per se.

14. (C) Comment: Prime Minister Meles' public and private comments appear intended to put the opposition on notice of the "red lines" for the government. Over the past few months, GoE officials have implied that opposition leaders

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are allied with the OLF. Interestingly, the government remains open to talks with the OLF with its ambassador to Brussels, Former Ethiopian Ambassador to the U.S., Berhane Gebrechristol, serving as the point person. The Ethiopian elders who negotiated the release of the political detainees have the green light from the government to talk with the OLF and ONLF in Germany, London and Washington beginning next week.

15. (C) Comment Continued: The comments by the GoE are the most provocative since the post 2005 election period. Post has, and will continue to, emphasize to opposition interlocutors the imperative to operate exclusively within the parameters of the law. We will also stress to GoE officials that threats of detention of opposition leaders and/or their supporters, even though it is a tactic to warn of "red lines," would undercut progress made on parliamentary reforms and negate the positive political capital earned through the release of 71 opposition leaders and civil society members in August. We continue to work with the ruling EPRDF as well as opposition to promote inter party dialogue. We also hold the eight point plan for reform agreed to by the EPRDF and opposition parties in July 2005 as the basis for forward progress on reform in the parliament and political process. We are being proactive in meeting with the opposition and ruling EPRDF party, helping to facilitate dialogue and opening political space to allow for uninhibited exchange of views. End Comment.
YAMAMOTO